

THE SUPERVISION OF OFFENDERS IN THE COMMUNITY

Question: How are offenders supervised while they are in the community?

Background: In Canada, the vast majority of offenders are under some form of community supervision. In 2001-02, there were 101,915 offenders serving a sentence of probation with an additional 8,578 offenders on some form of conditional release (including both provincial and federal parole). In contrast, there were 31,926 incarcerated offenders. Although most offenders with a community sanction are at a relatively low risk to re-offend, there are offenders who are at a higher risk. For example, some offenders under community supervision first serve a custodial sentence before being paroled and others are required to serve a custodial sentence followed by a period of probation. Thus, there is considerable variability in the types of offenders under community supervision and probation officers have the responsibility to supervise these offenders safely in the community. How well probation officers supervise offenders is of interest to the community agencies charged with this responsibility as well as to the general public.

Method: A study examining the activities of probation officers supervising offenders in the province of Manitoba was conducted. At the beginning of probation supervision, 136 adult and youth (under the age of 18)

probationers were assessed to determine their needs with respect to rehabilitation. Next, meetings between the probation officer and his/her client were audio taped to determine what was discussed during these sessions and how these discussions were related to the needs of the probationers. Two goals of this study were to understand how probation officers formulated plans to address the needs of their clients and how they tried to influence offenders to change.

Answer: Upon admission to probation all offenders are typically assessed as to their risk to re-offend and their needs. As expected, high-risk adult offenders were seen more frequently by their supervising probation officer than lower risk adult offenders. There was, however, no difference in the frequency of contact between probation officers and young offenders. After completing an assessment of needs, probation officers then formulate a case management plan that describes how these needs are to be addressed. One of the most frequently identified needs for adults was substance abuse and most of the case plans (80%) included a strategy to deal with this problem. For young offenders, family problems were identified in 40% of the cases and an intervention to address this need was present in 83% of case plans where this need was identified.

Analyses of the audiotapes showed that probation officers spent most of their first session with the offender reviewing the conditions of probation imposed by the court. As expected, substance abuse among adults, and family issues for youth, were the topics most frequently discussed (78% and 77% respectively). In addition, family problems were discussed in 90% of adult cases with family dysfunction whereas for youth, accommodation was the second most frequent problem discussed (73% of cases).

Probation officers demonstrated a great deal of prompting and encouraging their clients to act in a prosocial manner. Approximately 96% of the audiotapes demonstrated such behaviour from the probation officer. Unfriendly and hostile behaviour by probation officers were almost completely absent in the audiotapes. Probation officers were also quite adept at reinforcing prosocial behaviours on the part of probationers. Although there were many examples of helpful behaviours on the part of probation officers, the study did reveal areas where probation officers can improve upon in their interactions with clients. For example, there was a need for probation officers to be more attentive to antisocial behaviour and deal with this more appropriately.

Policy Implications:

1. With most offenders under community supervision, understanding how they are supervised in the community is an important step toward improving the safety of all Canadians.
2. The identification of offender needs and the formulation of a case plan to address these needs are the cornerstones of effective supervision.
3. Training probation officers to develop appropriate case plans and to improve their intervention skills with offenders will enhance the successful supervision of offenders in the community.

Source: Bonta, J., Rugge, T., Sedo, B., & Coles, R. (2004). *Case management in Manitoba probation*. (User Report 2004-01). Ottawa: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.

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